

THE FIR-TREE'S STORY.

A FAIRY TALE.

Translated from the German.

"Why did the fir-tree creak when the daisy said Winter was bad-tempered and did not love the flowers?" asked the lime-tree. "Because he was vexed," answered the oak; "when he is vexed he creaks, have you never noticed that? When the wind rushes through the forest he cries to us trees, 'Bow down;' but the fir-tree says 'Stand upright,' and when the forest trees, in awe and fear, bow to the wind, the fir-tree stands stiff and straight, twists round angrily, and creaks, because he is vexed."

"What has that to do with Winter and the daisy?" asked the lime.

"Ask him, ask him," chattered the poplar, "then you will hear what he says; he can give sharp answers."

Now the lime-tree was inquisitive, and who can wonder at it? If one is bound to the same spot year by year, he does not care to miss a story just for fear of a sharp answer. But she was wise, and tried to find a suitable beginning.

"Fir-tree," she said at last, "how is it you always wear the same dress in summer and winter all the year round?"

"Because I am not vain, and do not always want new things like you," was the answer.

"There, now you know the reason," laughed the poplar.

The lime-tree was too inquisitive to pretend to be offended by this sharp answer, and that was a good thing, or she would never have heard the story of Winter.

Turning once more to her disagreeable neighbour she said, "You might tell us something about Winter! You know him and love him, and we know nothing about him. When he comes we are asleep, you alone are awake and talk to him through all those long, long months."

The fir-tree was silent for some time, and all the trees waited anxiously for a reply.

At last he said, "Leave me alone, and if you want to know something about Winter, stay awake; he who wants to learn must not sleep."

Here the conversation would have been at an end, if the oak had not intervened. He was the oldest and strongest of the forest trees, and was highly esteemed by them all. "Fir-tree," he said, "you show your most disagreeable side, but you are not as bad as you seem; I know you better, for I saw you when you were hardly a year old. Why are you so gruff? Tell your companions your story, rejoice with them now in happy days, that they may mourn with you when the dark days come."

These were serious words, and the fir-tree took them to heart, and began, "You want to hear about Winter? Very well! Lay down the prejudice you have against him, for I know you do not love him. Do not think I am partial because I am his friend. I am only just because I know him. However, let us come to the point. When God had created the world, when the flowers decked the meadows and the trees waved their branches, He called the Seasons and said to them, 'Behold the earth, how beautiful it is. I give it to you; divide the flowers and trees amongst you, but love and tend them carefully.' And the Seasons rejoiced exceedingly, and dearly loved the children of Nature. That lasted a time, but soon they began to quarrel. Changeable, boisterous Spring could not agree with deliberate Winter; glowing Summer thought Autumn too phlegmatic. In short, their quarrels grew worse and worse, till Autumn declared, 'This state of things cannot continue; we do not agree; let us divide the earth amongst us, so that each of us may have a portion he can call his own.' And so it happened: Winter built his palace at the Poles, Summer took the middle of the earth, and between the two Spring and Autumn reigned supreme. You will soon hear that this arrangement did not last long, but it was not changed completely, and Winter still lives in his old palace."

"How do you know that?" asked the linden.

"My cousin, who went to see him, told me all about it."

"How could your cousin visit him?" asked the birch; "is he not bound to the earth, even as we are?"

"It happened in this way," answered the fir-tree. "Once upon a time some enterprising men came to the forest and looked for

wood to build a ship. My cousin, a tall straight fir, stood up proudly amongst the other trees. They saw him, they cut him down and turned him into a mast. Then they went to sea! The sailors gave him a large cloth and said, 'Hold it fast.' My cousin enjoyed the voyage, and did his duty bravely, for when the wind came and wanted to carry away the cloth, he held it tightly, and did not bend. The voyage went northward, ever northward, and behold! suddenly they arrived at King Winter's palace. When the ship knocked, Winter came out, and was very much astonished to see such a strange visitor. Then he remembered how unkindly he is often welcomed on earth, and angrily he shook his head till the snowflakes flew about wildly. Suddenly he saw my cousin, and, as he is specially fond of us firs, his anger melted, and he began to chat merrily, and to tell him most wonderful stories. One of them I am telling you now.

"Old King Winter was so happy that he would not let the ship go, and folded it tightly in his strong arms! My cousin was delighted; but the happier he was, the more miserable were the sailors. One morning he heard them saying, 'Our firewood has come to an end, and if the ice does not melt soon we must all perish. Let us cut down the mast, that will help us for a time.' When my cousin heard that he begged Winter to let the ship go, and Winter consented for the sake of the fir-tree. He let the ice melt, and the crew returned home in safety."

"That was a good thing," cried the trees.

"But now let me return to my story. The earth was divided, and each Season had his own kingdom; so it would have remained, had not Spring, in his usual fashion, again wanted a change. He did not care to remain in the same place from year to year, so he called the Seasons together and made this proposal. 'Let us make another division,' he cried, 'and as the whole earth belongs to each of us, let us not always be bound to one region. Let each have a certain time, during which the whole world shall be his.' 'I have no objection,' said Summer, 'provided I may keep the centre of the earth.' 'And I my Poles,' cried Winter. Spring agreed, glad to have his own way, and Autumn hoped to find a recompense somehow. So the compact was made, and Spring was about to begin his reign, when Winter said, 'Let us also divide the beauties of Nature, that one may not have all and the others nothing.' 'Very well,' cried Spring, 'I take the buds.'

"'Mine be the flowers,' said Summer.

"'And mine the fruit,' exclaimed Autumn, 'and Winter can have the leaves.'

"Winter was agreeable, the compact was made, and Spring began to reign. Trees and flowers he kissed into buds, and a radiant smile broke over the face of the earth. When the buds burst, and leaves and flowers shone in glowing colours, Summer began to rule. Now things became more complicated, for Autumn made a special arrangement with Summer by which he gave him some of his fruits, and demanded flowers in return; and when his reign began he gathered his fruit with busy hands, for that was his due.

"Now something happened by which poor Winter was sadly deceived. You remember that, according to the agreement, the leaves of the trees belonged to Winter. But in glowing summer-time, when the leaves trembled high up in the air, and the flowers shone in the grass below, a little flirtation had sprung up between them. As often happens, love began in fun. When the sun tried to shine on the flowers the leaves stood in the way; then suddenly they bent down, and the sunlight fell on the little ones below and dazzled them completely; then the leaves laughed in the branches above. Or when a summer shower fell, the leaves collected drops, and when the rain was over they shook them down, and startled the flowers. It was all fun at first, but it soon became an act of love, for the sun grew hotter and hotter, and the poor little flowers would have withered and died had not the leaves, like a shield, caught the fiery darts of the sun.

"As love grew deeper they longed to be united; but up above hung the leaves, and the flowers shone in the grass below. Love always finds ways and means, and so flowers and leaves soon found a messenger—clinging Ivy—who henceforth carried vows and sighs from one to the other. He sprang up amongst the flowers, and climbed up to the leaves of the trees, a silent bond of love.

"The reign of Autumn was over, and he was about to gather the last flowers; the leaves paled and withered at the thought of parting from their beloved companions, and entreated Autumn to let them down just once, that they might bid them a last farewell. And Autumn granted their prayer, though he had no right to do so. He shook the trees, and down flew the

leaves to earth; he played a weird tune, and they whirled round the flowers in a wild dance, till pale and weary they drooped and died; and as Autumn's music ceased, the leaves too sank down to rest. Then Winter approached; bleak and bare stood hill and dale; only we firs were bright and green, only the ivy crept from tree to tree as if to hide the faithlessness of the leaves. Winter was touched; angrily he shook the last dead leaves off the trees, and whirled them over snow and ice; but to the ivy he spoke solemnly: 'I will protect thee, I will guard thee, that thou mayest pursue the sweet vocation thou hast chosen; remain for ever a messenger of love; carry silent greetings from flower to leaf, from Autumn to Spring; build an everlasting bridge from season to season; thy vocation be to embrace and unite; thou, the happy remembrancer of sunny days, thou shalt even soften the severity of Winter.' Thus spoke Winter to the ivy. But we fir-trees he loves with all his heart; and at Christmas he raises us to honour and glory, such as you can never imagine—no, not in your brightest dreams."

"Tell us about it; tell us about it!" cried the trees.

"Another time," answered the fir; "yes, another time."

BOOKS.

"En hoexkens ende boexkens."

The Three Sisters; or, Sketches of a Highly Original Family (Sampson Low, Marston, and Co., 2 vols.) justifies its title. The Denbighs are an original family; the sisters are actual persons; and, whenever, whether in story-book or real life, you get a person standing forth in his or her proper individuality, there you get originality. "Dorry" has another claim; "the quaint child" is something more than unconventional; she is original as an artistic creation; we do not know of another "Dorry" in all literature; and that delightful world of the people born of the pen may greet her as "an acquisition to society;" that is, if they do talk about each other. Do they? We suspect Dorry, though: is she not rather a pathetically faithful and tender study from the life? Anyway, she is good to know, this brave, sweet, loving, droll, pathetically prudent woman-child. We must congratulate Miss D'Esterre-Keeling on her courage in attempting a theme so like that of "Little Women," and on her success in creating a companion group of sisters, fully as interesting as the "Marshes," and in so different a way. The American girls have plenty of fun and incident in their lives—are always cherished in a happy home. These three Irish girls and their mother struggle for dear life to get the means of living, in a *Residenz*, the capital of one of the minor German States, where Nora studies music. Fifty years ago the second title of the work would doubtless have run, "or, the Triumph of Character over Circumstances." The theme, upon which no variation is attempted, is dreary and depressing; you prepare yourself for dull or sad reading; and there is hardly a page over which you do not laugh uncontrollably; the fun lying entirely in the way "the family" take life. The pluck, resource, and indomitable courage and energy of "the Denbighs"—ladies always, whatever the situation—are worth reading of, and we should like "The Three Sisters" to be in the hands of girls, especially for the sake of the lessons of life, which go home with the more force because they come with no mark of design. May we in all humility ask the author one question? Does she think it fair to take away the reader's breath by marrying Elizabeth, without rhyme or reason, or one tittle of love-making by way of concession to human weakness?

The Educational Annual (2s. 6d.), compiled by Edward Johnson (George Philip and Sons), is a mine of information dealing with every sort of educational establishment in the kingdom, public or private. For example, do you wish to know what scholarships and exhibitions are attached to the several colleges? what are the expenses of residence at each? Here you find detailed and accurate information.